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Hector Is 'Missing' And It Would Seem Nicaragua Has Him

When it comes to style, the streets of Washington rank among the most stupefyingly boring in the world. You see your basic lobbyists clad in Midwestern chic, your basic secretaries and junior female executives robed in the dress-for-success suits. Only the messengers look cheerfully bizarre; even the bag ladies dress respectably. But when it comes to politics, the street traffic in this city is the best. Just a couple of days ago, for instance, there dropped in over the transom of this average journalist word of a not-so-average kidnapping.

Clara Frances, a 34-year-old Argentinian, walked into the office straight out of a film by Costa-Gavras, carrying a stack of neatly fastened letters and a street map of Washington. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, a friendly and freckled no-nonsense face, and the dress of a woman with a little money but not very much. She took off her jacket, lit the first of many cigarettes, and began. Her husband had been kidnapped last fall, she said, by the Sandinistas. He was still in prison in Nicaragua.

She and her husband Hector were not political, she insisted. She was a CPA with a master's degree in business and economics. He had studied architecture but stopped when his mother fell ill. Jobs in his field were hard to come by in his native Argentina, but he finally found one in Honduras. The couple did not want to live amid Honduran political agitation, so they found themselves a place nearby in the peaceful enclave of Costa Rica. Mrs. Frances says they lived a private life there. She is at least as believable in her assertion as the stories that commonly circulate about people who have disappeared under right-wing regimes.

She became pregnant and had a baby, Maria Fernanda, now eight months old. Mrs. Frances took out pictures: the baby smiling in her diaper, the baby in her handsome father's arms.

One afternoon last fall the parents went out shopping near their Costa Rican home and were set upon by a group of men who beat Hector brutally in full view of spectators, stuffed him into a car, and drove away. Several weeks later in the Costa Rican press Clara read that the kidnapping had been organized by the Nicaraguans.

In the winter the Latin American Press Federation, whose head is Sandinist, began distributing a videotape of the captured Hector. In it, said Mrs. Frances, he looked like a man who had only recently been subjected to horrible physical maltreatment. On the tape Mr. Frances spoke of himself as an Argentinian agent and said he had staged his own kidnapping. He spoke of all the plots that foreign forces were concocting against the Nicaraguan government.

The tape confirmed that it was the Nicaraguans who had Mr. Frances. Mrs. Frances thinks they took him either because they had him confused with some other man or because they needed an Argentinian as a mouthpiece for their accusations. She soon set out on the pilgrimage route so familiar to the kin of the captured or missing, through Washington and Geneva and any other place where she might find a helpful authority. She went to the First World Congress on Human Rights in Costa Rica. A Nicaraguan delegate there confirmed that Hector was in Nicaragua. The delegate said that the prisoner was in bad shape but promised to help.

She went to Geneva, to a U.N. conference on disappearances and torture. She met another Nicaraguan official there, who said he would find out more for her; so far there is no news.

In Geneva she also talked to the delegate representing Costa Rica, who wished he could help but said the Costa Ricans had so many troubles with the Nicaraguans that they were not going to blow their small fund of influence on a little matter like hers. She left letters with all the missions in Geneva. She went to Rome and deposited a letter with the Vatican.

Now she has come to the United States and visited our delegation to the United Nations. She has gone to the human rights people at the State Department. She has visited a congressional staffer on the Hill. She has met with staffers from Amnesty International.

"I am democratic," Mrs. Frances described her attitudes towards her nightmare. "We went to live in Costa Rica because it is a democracy and you can live peacefully there. My politics are that I don't want to bother anybody and I don't want anybody to bother me." If you wanted to make her cry, all you had to do was ask her about her baby, or her plans for the future, or simply how things were going for her now.

The Sandinistas, of course, are doing nothing they could not have learned from the Somoza regime before them and little that is not practiced by regimes of the right as well.

But the revolutionary left wields these tools in a special way. It is natural for them to go after their prey by violating the territory of Costa Rica: To them, the country is not a peaceful sovereign nation but simply a staging area for the illegitimate plans of the CIA. It is natural for the Sandinistas to make their videotape; they do not want to shut Mr. Frances up but to make him a public witness. And in other nations of the world, the voices that are so quick to condemn disappearances in countries of the right are silent on the left-wing version.

We are now acutely aware that this is an area of the world where borders are no protection between states and laws do not provide the boundaries which in other places keep people's private happiness from turning into public nightmare. To listen to Mrs. Frances is to be reminded, as even the very ordinary streets of Washington ought to remind us, that the most important goal of modern politics must be to protect private human beings from being made the objects of public whim.